



Testimony

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House of Representatives

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MILITARY PERSONNEL

Actions Needed to Strengthen Implementation and Oversight of DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs

Statement of Brenda S. Farrell, Director
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Why GAO Did This Study

In 2004, Congress directed the Department of Defense (DOD) to establish a comprehensive policy to prevent and respond to sexual assaults involving servicemembers. Though not required to do so, the Coast Guard has established a similar policy. This statement addresses implementation and oversight of DOD's and the Coast Guard's programs to prevent and respond to sexual assault incidents. Specifically, it addresses the extent to which DOD and the Coast Guard (1) have developed and implemented policies and procedures to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported sexual assault incidents; (2) have visibility over reports of sexual assault in the military; and (3) exercise oversight over reports of sexual assault involving servicemembers. This statement draws on GAO's report on DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response programs issued on August 29, 2008 (GAO-08-924). For this work, GAO reviewed legislative requirements and DOD and Coast Guard guidance, analyzed sexual assault incident data, and obtained through surveys and interviews the perspective of more than 3,900 servicemembers on sexual assault matters.

GAO made 11 recommendations to improve implementation of DOD's and the Coast Guard's programs. These include, for example, reviewing and evaluating guidance and training, and improving oversight of the programs. DOD and the Coast Guard concurred with the recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-1146T](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

MILITARY PERSONNEL

Actions Needed to Strengthen Implementation and Oversight of DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs

What GAO Found

DOD and the Coast Guard have established policies and programs to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported sexual assault incidents involving servicemembers; however, implementation of the programs is hindered by several factors. GAO found that (1) DOD's guidance may not adequately address some important issues, such as how to implement the program in deployed and joint environments; (2) most, but not all commanders support the programs; (3) required sexual assault prevention and response training is not consistently effective; and (4) factors such as a DOD-reported shortage of mental health care providers affect whether servicemembers who are victims of sexual assault can or do access mental health services. Left unchecked, these challenges can discourage or prevent some servicemembers from using the programs when needed.

GAO found, based on responses to its nongeneralizable survey administered to 3,750 servicemembers and a 2006 DOD survey, the most recent available, that occurrences of sexual assault may be exceeding the rates being reported, suggesting that DOD and the Coast Guard have only limited visibility over the incidence of these occurrences. At the 14 installations where GAO administered its survey, 103 servicemembers indicated that they had been sexually assaulted within the preceding 12 months. Of these, 52 servicemembers indicated that they did not report the sexual assault. GAO also found that factors that discourage servicemembers from reporting a sexual assault include the belief that nothing would be done; fear of ostracism, harassment, or ridicule; and concern that peers would gossip. There were also concerns that reporting an incident would negatively affect their careers or unit morale and that a report made using the restricted reporting option would not remain confidential.

Although DOD and the Coast Guard have established some mechanisms for overseeing reports of sexual assault, neither has developed an oversight framework—including clear objectives, milestones, performance measures, and criteria for measuring progress—to guide their efforts. GAO's prior work has demonstrated the importance of outcome-oriented performance measures to successful program oversight, and that an effective plan for implementing initiatives and measuring progress can help decision makers determine whether initiatives are achieving desired results. DOD provides information on reports of alleged sexual assaults annually to Congress. However, DOD's report does not include some data that would aid congressional oversight, such as why some sexual assaults could not be substantiated following an investigation. Further, the military services have not provided data that would facilitate oversight and enable DOD to conduct trend analyses. While the Coast Guard voluntarily provides data to DOD for inclusion in its report, this information is not provided to Congress because there is no requirement to do so. Without an oversight framework, as well as more complete data, decision makers in DOD, the Coast Guard, and Congress lack information they need to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today for this follow-up hearing to discuss issues related to the Department of Defense's (DOD) and the Coast Guard's programs to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported incidents of sexual assault. Sexual assault is a crime that contradicts the core values that DOD, the military services,¹ and the Coast Guard expect servicemembers to follow, such as treating their fellow members with dignity and respect. Recognizing this, in 2004 Congress directed the Secretary of Defense to develop a comprehensive policy for DOD on the prevention of and response to sexual assaults involving servicemembers, including an option that would enable servicemembers to confidentially disclose an incident of sexual assault. Since 2005, active duty servicemembers have had two options for reporting an alleged sexual assault: (1) *restricted*, which allows victims of sexual assault to disclose a sexual assault incident to specific individuals and receive medical care and other victim advocacy services without initiating a criminal investigation, and (2) *unrestricted*, which entails notification of the chain of command and may trigger a criminal investigation. Although these requirements do not apply to the Coast Guard, which is overseen by the Department of Homeland Security, the Coast Guard has adopted similar reporting options.

Mr. Chairman, you have recognized the need to shed light on this important issue. Specifically, you and the Ranking Member asked GAO to examine sexual assault prevention and response programs at the military academies as well as at military installations within DOD and the Coast Guard and during deployments. In response, we issued a report in January 2008 that reviewed programs to address sexual assault and sexual harassment at the military and Coast Guard academies.² Also, on July 31, 2008, we testified before the subcommittee on our preliminary observations on DOD's and the Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention

¹For purposes of this testimony, we use "military services" to refer collectively to the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, and the Marine Corps. While the Coast Guard is a military service, it generally falls under the control of the Department of Homeland Security and not the Department of Defense. Therefore, we address the Coast Guard separately from the other military services.

²GAO, *Military Personnel: The DOD and Coast Guard Academies Have Taken Steps to Address Incidents of Sexual Harassment and Assault, but Greater Federal Oversight Is Needed*, [GAO-08-296](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 17, 2008).

and Response Programs.³ Further, on August 29, 2008, we issued a comprehensive report that expanded upon the preliminary observations we discussed during the July hearing that examines implementation and oversight of sexual assault prevention and response programs for the active duty servicemembers in DOD and the Coast Guard, including during deployments.⁴

My testimony today summarizes the findings and recommendations of our comprehensive August 2008 report. Specifically, in my remarks today I will discuss the extent to which DOD and the Coast Guard

- have developed and implemented policies and programs to prevent, respond to, and resolve sexual assault incidents involving servicemembers;
- have visibility over reports of sexual assault involving servicemembers; and
- exercise oversight over reports of sexual assault involving servicemembers.

To conduct our work, we reviewed legislative requirements; reviewed DOD's, the military services', and the Coast Guard's guidance and requirements for the prevention of, response to, and resolution of sexual assault; analyzed sexual assault incident data; and visited 15 military installations in the United States and overseas to assess implementation of the programs. At the installations we visited, we met with sexual assault prevention and response program coordinators; victim advocates; judge advocates; medical and mental health personnel; criminal investigative personnel; law enforcement personnel; chaplains; various military commanders, including company and field grade officers; and senior enlisted servicemembers. We also obtained the perspective of more than 3,900 servicemembers by administering a total of 3,750 confidential surveys to a nonprobability sample of randomly selected servicemembers and conducting more than 150 one-on-one, structured interviews with randomly selected servicemembers at 14 of the 15 installations we visited. Our survey is the first since 2006 to obtain the perspectives of selected

³GAO, *Military Personnel: Preliminary Observations on DOD's and Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs*, [GAO-08-1013T](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2008).

⁴GAO, *Military Personnel: DOD's and Coast Guard's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs Face Implementations and Oversight Challenges*, [GAO-08-924](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 29, 2008).

servicemembers in each military service and the Coast Guard on sexual assault issues, and the first to assess sexual assault issues in the Coast Guard since the restricted reporting option became available in December 2007. Because we did not select survey and interview participants using a statistically representative sampling method, our survey results and the comments provided during our interview sessions are nongeneralizable and therefore cannot be projected across DOD, a service, or any single installation we visited. However, the survey results and comments provide insight into the command climate and implementation of sexual assault prevention and response programs at each location at the time of our visit.

We conducted this performance audit from July 2007 through August 2008 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Summary

DOD has taken steps, in response to congressional direction, to develop and implement policies and programs to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported sexual assault incidents, and the Coast Guard has taken similar steps on its own initiative. However, we found that DOD's guidance may not adequately address some important issues, such as how to implement the program in deployed and joint environments. We also found that implementation is hindered by (1) the lack of support from some commanders, (2) training that is not consistently effective, and (3) limitations on access to mental health services. Further, based on responses to our survey and a 2006 DOD survey, we found that occurrences of sexual assault may be exceeding the rates being reported, suggesting that DOD and the Coast Guard have only limited visibility over the incidence of these occurrences. DOD and the military services provide information on reports of alleged sexual assaults annually to Congress in accordance with statutory requirements. However, DOD's report does not include some data that would aid congressional oversight, such as why some sexual assaults could not be substantiated following an investigation. Further, while the Coast Guard voluntarily provides data to DOD for inclusion in its report, this information is not provided to Congress because there is no requirement to do so. Importantly, we also found that while DOD and the Coast Guard have established some mechanisms for overseeing reports of sexual assaults involving servicemembers, both lack an oversight framework—including clear

objectives, milestones, performance measures, and criteria for measuring progress—to guide their efforts. DOD also lacks key information needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the department’s sexual assault prevention and response program. GAO made 11 recommendations to improve implementation of DOD’s and the Coast Guard’s programs. These include, for example, reviewing and evaluating guidance and training, and improving oversight of the programs. DOD and the Coast Guard concurred with the recommendations.

Implementation of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs Is Hindered by a Number of Factors

DOD has taken positive steps to respond to congressional direction by developing and implementing policies and a program to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported sexual assault incidents involving servicemembers, and the Coast Guard has on its own initiative taken similar steps. However, DOD’s guidance may not adequately address some important issues, and implementation of the program is hindered by several factors. To their credit, DOD and the Coast Guard have issued guidance for preventing and responding to reports of sexual assault and have established offices to oversee sexual assault matters.⁵ The military services and the Coast Guard have also established and staffed key positions to manage programs at installations and require servicemembers to receive periodic training on their respective sexual assault prevention and response programs. However, DOD’s guidance may not adequately address some important issues, such as how to implement the program when operating in deployed or joint environments. Program officials we met with overseas told us that DOD’s guidance does not sufficiently take into account the realities of operating in a deployed environment, in which unique living and social circumstances can heighten the risks for sexual assault and program resources are more widely dispersed than they are in the United States, which can make responding to a sexual assault challenging. For example, at one installation we found no criminal investigative presence, and program officials told us that it can take 48 hours or longer for the criminal investigative organization with jurisdiction to respond to some sexual assaults. Further, we identified a number of factors that hinder implementation of the programs, including the following.

⁵Department of Defense Directive 6495.01, *Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) Program* (Oct. 6, 2005), Department of Defense Instruction 6495.02, *Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program Procedures* (June 23, 2006), and Commandant Instruction 1754.10C, *Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program (SAPRP)* (Dec. 20, 2007).

While Most Commanders
Support the Programs, Some
Do Not

At the installations we visited, we generally found that commanders—that is, company and field grade officers⁶—had taken actions to address incidents of sexual assault and were generally supportive of sexual assault prevention and response programs. However, at some of these installations we found evidence that not all commanders supported the program. Further, we found that implementation of the programs may be hindered at some installations where key program coordinator positions are a collateral duty. DOD's guidance calls for commanders and other leaders to advocate a strong sexual assault prevention and response program, and the Coast Guard's guidance similarly calls for commanders and other leaders to ensure compliance with Coast Guard policies and procedures. At the installations we visited, commanders told us that they set a zero tolerance policy for incidents of sexual assault, communicated the respective policies at command briefings, understood their roles and responsibilities in supporting the programs, and understood the need to protect victims. The results of our nongeneralizable survey supported these statements; at the 14 installations where we administered our survey, the percentage of servicemembers who indicated that they thought their direct supervisor (military or civilian) would address sexual assault, should it occur at their current location, ranged from 91 to 98 percent. However, we also found evidence that some commanders did not support the programs. For example, at 3 of the installations we visited program officials told us of meeting with resistance from commanders when attempting to advertise, in barracks and work areas, the programs or the options for reporting a sexual assault. Also, some program officials told us that commanders do not support the programs because they do not understand them or do not consider sexual assault matters to be a priority in the military. Program officials also told us that they lacked the resources to promote the programs and raise servicemembers' awareness of sexual assault matters. Further, some key program coordinators, such as Sexual Assault Response Coordinators or Employee Assistance Program Coordinators, lack the time and resources to devote to the programs. Neither DOD nor the Coast Guard has performed a systematic analysis to evaluate their processes for staffing key program coordinator positions, and thus both are hindered in their ability to ensure that key installation-level program officials can effectively perform their duties in implementing the programs.

⁶Company grade officers encompass the ranks of O1-O3 and field grade officers encompass the ranks of O4-O6.

Training Is Not Consistently Effective

Although DOD and the Coast Guard require that all servicemembers receive periodic training on their respective sexual assault prevention and response programs, our survey, interviews, and discussions with servicemembers and program officials revealed that most but not all servicemembers are receiving the required training, and that some who have received it still would not know or were not sure how to report a sexual assault using the restricted reporting option. We also found that neither DOD nor the Coast Guard has systematically evaluated the effectiveness of the training provided to date. Some servicemembers told us that the training they received was not engaging and, therefore, they did not pay attention, and others said that servicemembers do not always take the training seriously. For example, while the majority of respondents to our survey indicated that they had received required sexual assault prevention and response training and would know how to report a sexual assault using the restricted reporting option, as table 1 shows, the percentage of servicemembers we surveyed who indicated that they would not know or were not sure of how to report a sexual assault using the restricted reporting option, despite having received the training ranged from 13 to 43 percent at the seven installations we surveyed in the United States and from 13 to 28 percent at the seven installations where we administered the survey overseas.

Table 1: Percentage of Selected Servicemembers Who Reported Receiving Required Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Training and Also Reported They Would Not Know or Were Not Sure of How to Report a Sexual Assault Using the Restricted Reporting Option

Installation	Percentage of selected servicemembers who reported having received required training and also reported that they would know how to report a sexual assault using the restricted reporting option	Percentage of selected servicemembers who reported having received required training and also reported that they would not know or were not sure how to report a sexual assault using the restricted reporting option
	Percentage	Percentage
United States		
Camp Lejeune	68	32
Fort Bliss	81	19
Fort Drum	84	16
Integrated Support Command Portsmouth ^a	60	40
Lackland Air Force Base	87	13
Marine Corps Base Quantico	57	43
Naval Station Norfolk	78	22
Overseas		
Al Udeid Air Base	85	15
Balad Air Base	82	18
Camp Arifjan	83	17
Camp Ramadi	87	13
Camp Stryker	72	28
Logistics Support Area Anaconda	82	18
Naval Support Activity Bahrain ^b	78	22

Source: GAO.

^aIncludes servicemembers from Yorktown Training Center, Virginia.

^bIncludes Coast Guard members under the operational command of U.S. Central Command.

Servicemembers who have not received the required training or who have received training that is not effective may not know how to mitigate the possibility of being sexually assaulted or how to seek assistance if needed, and they are at risk for not knowing how to report an assault in a way that does not limit their option to seek treatment while maintaining confidentiality.

Access to Mental Health Services May Be Limited

DOD and the Coast Guard require that sexual assault victims be made aware of available mental health services, and in 2007, DOD's Mental Health Task Force recommended that DOD take action to address factors that may prevent some servicemembers from seeking mental health care.

However, we found that several factors—including a DOD-reported shortage of mental health care providers, the logistical challenges of operating overseas or in geographically remote locations, and servicemembers’ perceptions of a stigma associated with mental health care—can affect whether servicemembers who are victims of sexual assault can or do access mental health services. Further, we could find no indication that either DOD or the Coast Guard has performed an analysis to aid in addressing barriers to mental health care specifically for victims of sexual assault. To their credit, DOD and the Coast Guard screen servicemembers for mental health concerns, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, which can afflict victims of sexual assault. Officials at some of the installations we visited told us that one barrier to ensuring that victims of sexual assault receive mental health care if they desire it is the lack of adequate resources and staff at some installations. Some mental health care officials we spoke with overseas said that the shortage of providers can make it even more difficult for servicemembers to seek mental health care, for any reason, in overseas locations or geographically remote locations in the United States. However, we did find that the military services were taking steps to address this challenge. For example, DOD has established a memorandum of understanding with the Public Health Service to enable its uniformed providers to work in military treatment facilities. Perceptions of stigma may also discourage servicemembers from seeking mental health care following a sexual assault, but DOD recently took steps that may encourage servicemembers to do so by successfully advocating a revision to Standard Form 86, Questionnaire for National Security Positions.⁷ Under the revision, applicants no longer need to disclose certain noncourt-ordered mental health care treatment received in the preceding 7 years if it was (1) strictly marital, family, or grief related, as long as it was not related to violence committed by the servicemember, or (2) strictly related to adjustments following service in a military combat environment. Further, in an April 2008 memorandum from the Secretary of Defense, DOD noted that professional care for mental health issues should not be perceived as jeopardizing an individual’s security clearance.⁸ However, officials with DOD’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office told us that it is unclear whether these

⁷Standard Form 86, *Questionnaire for National Security Positions*, is a governmentwide form applicable not only to DOD servicemembers and civilians who occupy sensitive positions but to individuals who occupy sensitive positions across the federal government.

⁸Secretary of Defense Memorandum, “Policy Implementation—Mental Health Question, Standard Form (86), Questionnaire for National Security Positions” (Apr. 18, 2008).

steps will encourage servicemembers who are victims of sexual assault to seek mental health care and whether the revisions apply to servicemembers who have been sexually assaulted and seek mental health care.

Survey Data Suggest That Occurrences of Sexual Assault May Exceed Rates Reported

We found, based on responses to our nongeneralizable survey administered to 3,750 servicemembers and a 2006 DOD survey, the most recent available, that occurrences of sexual assault may be exceeding the rates being reported, suggesting that DOD and the Coast Guard have only limited visibility over the incidence of these occurrences. We recognize that the precise number of sexual assaults involving servicemembers is not possible to determine, and that studies suggest that sexual assaults are generally underreported in the United States. Nonetheless, our findings indicate that some servicemembers may choose not to report sexual assault incidents for a variety of reasons. In fiscal year 2007, DOD received 2,688 reports of alleged sexual assault, brought with either the restricted or unrestricted reporting option, involving servicemembers as either the alleged offenders or victims. The Coast Guard, which did not offer the restricted reporting option during fiscal year 2007, received 72 reports of alleged sexual assault brought with the unrestricted reporting option during that time period. However, servicemembers told us that they were aware of alleged sexual assault incidents involving other servicemembers that were not reported to program officials, and a 2006 Defense Manpower Data Center survey found that of the estimated 6.8 percent of women and 1.8 percent of men who experienced unwanted sexual contact⁹ during the prior 12 months, the majority chose not to report it. At the 14 installations where we administered our survey, 103 servicemembers indicated that they had been sexually assaulted within the preceding 12 months.¹⁰ Of these, 52 servicemembers indicated that they did not report the sexual assault. Notably, respondents to our survey revealed a number of reasons that discouraged servicemembers from reporting a sexual assault incident. Commonly cited reasons by survey respondents at the installations we visited included (1) the belief that nothing would be done; (2) fear of

⁹The 2006 *Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members* defines unwanted sexual contact to include rape, nonconsensual sodomy (oral or anal sex), or indecent assault (unwanted, inappropriate sexual contact or fondling) that can occur regardless of gender, age, or spousal relationship.

¹⁰Of these 103 servicemembers, 85 were female, 14 were male, and 4 did not indicate a gender on the survey.

ostracism, harassment, or ridicule by peers; and (3) the belief that their peers would gossip about the incident. There were also concerns that reporting an incident would negatively affect their careers or unit morale and that a report made using the restricted reporting option would not remain confidential.

While DOD and the Coast Guard Have Established Some Mechanisms for Oversight, They Lack an Oversight Framework

While DOD and the Coast Guard have established some mechanisms for overseeing reports of sexual assaults involving servicemembers, both lack an oversight framework, and DOD lacks key information needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the department's sexual assault prevention and response program. DOD's instruction charges the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (within the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Plans) with identifying and managing trends and establishing program evaluation, quality improvement, and oversight mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of the sexual response prevention and response program. Our prior work has demonstrated the importance of outcome-oriented performance measures to successful program oversight, and that an effective plan for implementing initiatives and measuring progress can help decision makers determine whether initiatives are achieving their desired results.¹¹ However, neither DOD nor the Coast Guard has developed an oversight framework that includes clear objectives, milestones, performance measures, or criteria for measuring progress. While DOD and the military services provide information on reports of alleged sexual assaults annually to Congress in accordance with statutory requirements, its report does not include some data that would aid congressional oversight, such as why some sexual assaults could not be substantiated following an investigation. Further, because some of the data collection elements are not clear, some data included in DOD's annual reports to Congress are open to misinterpretation and may not provide the information needed to facilitate congressional oversight or understanding of victims' use of the reporting options. In addition, the military services are not providing DOD with installation- and case-specific data beyond those statutorily required for inclusion in the department's annual report. Without such data, DOD lacks the means to fully execute its oversight role. Congress also lacks visibility over extent to which sexual assaults involving Coast Guard members occur. While the Coast Guard voluntarily provides the data to DOD for inclusion in its report, this

¹¹GAO, *Results-Oriented Cultures: Implementation Steps to Assist Mergers and Organizational Transformations*, [GAO-03-669](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 2, 2003).

information is not provided to Congress because there is no requirement to do so. To provide oversight of DOD's program, in 2004 Congress directed the Secretary of Defense to establish the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services to undertake an examination of matters relating to sexual assault in which members of the Armed Forces are either victims or offenders. Although DOD considers the task force's work to be an important oversight element, the task force only began its review in August 2008. Without an oversight framework, as well as more complete data, decision makers in DOD, the Coast Guard, and Congress lack information they need to evaluate and oversee the programs.

Recommendations from Our August 2008 Report

In our recently issued report, we suggested that Congress may wish to improve oversight of sexual assault incidents in the Coast Guard by requiring the Coast Guard to annually submit to Congress sexual assault incident and program data that are methodologically comparable to those required of DOD. We also made a number of recommendations to improve implementation of sexual assault prevention and response programs and improve oversight of the programs in DOD and the Coast Guard. With regard to DOD, to improve program implementation we recommended that the agency review and evaluate its guidance for the prevention of and response to sexual assault, to ensure that adequate guidance is provided to effectively implement the program in deployed environments and joint environments; evaluate its processes for staffing and designating key installation-level program positions, to ensure that these individuals have the ability and resources to fully carry out their responsibilities; review and evaluate its training, to ensure that the military services are meeting requirements and to enhance training effectiveness; systematically evaluate any factors that may prevent or discourage servicemembers from accessing mental health services following a sexual assault; and emphasize to all levels of command their responsibility for supporting the program, and review the extent to which resources are available to raise servicemembers' awareness of sexual assault matters. To enhance program oversight, we recommended that DOD develop an oversight framework to guide continued program implementation and evaluate program effectiveness; take specific steps to improve the usefulness of its annual report to Congress as an oversight tool; direct the service secretaries to provide installation-level incident data to the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office; and direct the Defense Task Force on Sexual Assault in the Military Services to begin its examination immediately, now that all members of the task force are appointed. With regard to the Coast Guard, we recommended that it evaluate its processes for staffing key installation-level program positions, to ensure that these

individuals have the ability and resources to fully carry out their responsibilities, and that it develop an oversight framework to guide continued program implementation and evaluate program effectiveness. In written comments on a draft of our report, both DOD and the Coast Guard concurred with all of our recommendations.

Concluding Observations

In closing, we want to recognize that DOD and the Coast Guard have taken positive steps to prevent, respond to, and resolve reported incidents of sexual assault. However, a number of challenges—such as limited guidance for implementing DOD’s policies in certain environments; limited support from some commanders, and limited resources for the programs; training that is not consistently effective; limited access to mental health services; and the lack of an oversight framework—could undermine the effectiveness of their efforts. Left unchecked, these challenges could undermine DOD’s and the Coast Guard’s efforts by eroding servicemembers’ confidence in the programs and thus decreasing the likelihood that sexual assault victims will turn to the programs for help when needed, and by limiting the ability of DOD and the Coast Guard to evaluate the overall successes, challenges, and lessons learned from their programs.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have at this time.

Contacts and Acknowledgments

If you have any questions on matters discussed in this testimony, please contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Key contributors to this statement include Marilyn K. Wasleski, Assistant Director; Joanna Chan; Pawnee A. Davis; K. Nicole Harms; Wesley A. Johnson; Ronald La Due Lake; Amanda K. Miller; and Cheryl A. Weissman.

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